



Get discounts up to 40%\* on auto insurance  
with Discount Double Check.®

\*Not available in all states.



[HOME](#) » [A PSALM FOR ALL SEASONS: STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS](#)

FROM THE SERIES: [A PSALM FOR ALL SEASONS: STUDIES IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS](#) [← PREVIOUS PAGE](#) | [NEXT PAGE →](#)

# 1. The Significance of the Psalms

## Introduction

The story has been told of two men who were the sole survivors of a shipwreck. They were afloat on a life raft and after several days had given up any hope of rescue. Finally, one said to the other, “Do you think it would do any good to pray?” The other agreed that nothing could be lost by trying. Neither, however, had ever prayed. Finally, one recalled living next door to a church as a child. He had often heard their mid-week meetings through an open window. Bowing his head he began to pray, repeating his recollection of the words he had heard uttered in that church so many years ago. His fervent prayer began, “I-26, B-15, N-7. ...”

We may smile at the naiveté of this man and at the fact that some churches know more about Bingo games than they do about Bible study or prayer. But before we begin to feel too smug allow me to suggest that many Protestant, evangelical churches are almost as ignorant when it comes to worship. For example, we call the 11:00 preaching hour the “worship hour.” Now while preaching should lead to worship, it often does not. When the preacher is through, he pronounces the benediction and the congregation gets up and leaves.

If there are any two areas in which the church of our Lord is deficient I believe that these would be in the areas of wisdom and worship. We have studied the Book of Proverbs in order to learn how we can become wise.<sup>1</sup> I am turning now to the Book of Psalms because I desire that you and I may learn to be worshippers, men and women who, like David, seek after God and yearn to know the heart of God. The greatest calling of the church and of individual

Christians is not to be evangelists or teachers or exhorters or comforters, but worshippers. The central focus of our lives should not be ourselves, or even others, but God (cf. [John 4:20-24](#); [Eph. 1:6, 12, 14](#); [3:21](#)). The glory of heaven is not that it will be a happy place, but that we will see God in His fullness and we will fall before Him in worship and adoration.

And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crown before the throne, saying, “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created” ([Rev. 4:9-11](#)).

My primary purpose in this study of the Psalms is to help each of us to gain a fuller appreciation for worship. In order to do this we must first come to appreciate the Psalms for the contribution they have made historically to the church and for what they can do in our lives. We must also approach the Psalms as a particular literary form, one we must become familiar with if we are to properly understand and apply the Psalms to our own lives. Then too, we must develop a particular methodology for our study to maximize its benefit to us. This is the purpose of our introductory lesson.

## The Unique Contribution of the Psalms

Religious poetry was not unique to the Israelites of old. Archaeologists have found numerous “psalms” of worship which peoples of the Ancient Near East offered to pagan deities.

O Lord, decider of the destinies of heaven and earth, whose word no one alters,  
Who controls water and fire, leader of living creatures, what god is like thee?

In heaven who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted.  
On earth who is exalted? Thou! Thou alone art exalted.

Thou! When thy word is pronounced in heaven the Igigi prostrate themselves.  
Thou! When thy word is pronounced on earth the Anunnaki kiss the ground.<sup>2</sup>

How manifold it is, what thou hast made!  
They are hidden from the face (of man).  
O sole god, like whom there is no other!  
Thou didst create the world according to thy desire,  
Whilst thou were alone:

All men, cattle, and wild beasts,  
Whatever is on earth, going upon (its) feet,  
And what is on high, flying with its wings.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these “psalms” is Assyrian, discovered by archaeologists in the ancient capital city of Nineveh, a hymn to the Moon-god, Sin. The second is an Egyptian hymn, sung to their sun god, Aton. In form, both of these hymns are strikingly similar to the Psalms of our Bible. Why, then, are the Psalms of the Bible so widely used in worship, while the others remain only the works of antiquity, studied for their archaeological value, rather than their religious contribution to men and women today? The answer to this question is found by considering the significance of the Psalms, both in biblical times and in the history of the church through the centuries.

## THE PSALMS ARE PROMINENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Depending upon which scholar you consult, Psalms is one of the two Old Testament books most frequently quoted in the New.<sup>4</sup> The other contender is the Book of Isaiah. Our Lord saw Himself as the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies and types of the Psalms.

Now He said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” ([Luke 24:44](#)).

In his debate with the Pharisees He cited [Psalm 110](#) ([Matt. 22:43-44](#)) to show that David spoke of Him in the Psalms. The Savior also uttered the beginning words of [Psalm 22](#) from the cross ([Matt. 27:46](#)).

In their preaching and writing, the apostles often quoted from the Psalms as biblical proof of the fact that Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. Peter quoted [Psalm 16:8-11](#) as proof that Jesus must be raised from the dead ([Acts 2:24-36](#)). Paul’s message was virtually identical (cf. [Acts 13:29-39](#)). Any book so prominent in the minds of the New Testament writers should also be important to us.

## THE PSALMS HAVE HAD A PROMINENT ROLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH THROUGH THE AGES

According to Paul’s letter to Timothy the reading of Scripture was to play an important role in the assembled worship of the saints ([1 Tim. 4:13](#)). From [1 Corinthians 14:26](#), [Ephesians 5:19](#) and [Colossians 3:16](#) we can safely infer that the singing of the Psalms was a vital part of the corporate worship experience of the church. While the translators have indicated a more

general category by their rendering of the term “psalms” (rather than “Psalms”), I believe the Old Testament Psalms were certainly included in this broader category (a point I will attempt to clarify later in this lesson).

Not only did the church continue to sing the Psalms, the early fathers often chose to write commentaries on the Book of Psalms. Among these fathers were Chrysostom and Augustine.

<sup>5</sup> The church of the Reformation made much use of the Psalms and men like Luther were known for their love of this book.<sup>6</sup> Leupold goes so far as to suggest, “Perhaps we are safe in saying that no biblical book has seen more use throughout Christendom than has the Psalter.”<sup>7</sup>

#### THE PSALMS SIGNIFICANTLY CONTRIBUTE TO THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH TODAY

Bernhard Anderson reminds us that in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, “especially where the ancient monastic usage is still preserved—the entire Psalter is recited once each week. In the Anglican church the Psalms are repeated once a month.”<sup>8</sup> Our church hymnals are filled with the Psalms, either quoted or paraphrased. The Psalms have provided inspiration for many hymnists. Leupold says that the Service Book and Hymnal of the Lutheran Church (1958) “includes more than one hundred Psalms.”<sup>9</sup> A look at our own church hymnal and songbook will confirm the fact that the Psalms significantly contribute to our worship in song.

There are several reasons why the Psalms have meant so much to the saints over the years. Let us take a few moments to consider these in order to stimulate our own desire to study the Psalms.

**(1) The Psalms speak to us.** We cannot read very far in the Psalms without drawing the conclusion that the psalmist seems to have been reading our mail. How is it that after centuries have passed we find a man who lived in a different time and culture expressing our innermost feelings, fears, and hopes? The answer, of course, is that we are reading the Scriptures, divinely inspired, infallible and inerrant, so as to be a word from God to us (cf. [1 Tim. 3:16,17](#); [2 Pet. 1:20-21](#)). Recognizing this, it was Luther who centuries ago said,

The Psalter is the favorite book of all the saints.... [Each person], whatever his circumstances may be, finds in [the book] psalms and words which are appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself and meet his needs as adequately as if they were composed exclusively for his sake, and in such a way that he himself could not improve on them nor find or desire any better psalms or words.<sup>10</sup>

In the Psalms the history of Israel is not only condensed (e.g., [Ps. 78](#)), but her theology is compressed. I once read an article with a title something like, “Israel’s Theology, Sung, not Said.” I think that is a correct assessment of the Book of Psalms in terms of its theology. Sabourin reminds us that the Psalter has been called “a microcosm of the whole Old Testament, ... the epitome of Israel’s spiritual experience.”<sup>11</sup>

Bernhard Anderson suggests another reason why the Psalms speak to us.<sup>12</sup> He reminds us that the Psalms were written at a point when Israel was between the initiation of God’s Kingdom and its culmination. Christians today live under similar circumstances. Our Lord has come to the earth as our Redeemer and Israel’s Messiah, but He has also returned to the Father to prepare a place for us ([John 14:1-3](#)). We are living in the interim, awaiting the culmination—the coming of God’s Kingdom, much like Israel of old. It is this anticipation and at the same time a sense of God’s absence (at times) which enables the saint of today to identify with the struggles of the saint of old and to find the Psalms striking a familiar chord in our own hearts and lives.

**(2) The Psalms speak for us.** It was Athanasius, an outstanding church leader in the fourth century, who reportedly declared “that the Psalms have a unique place in the Bible because most of the Scripture speaks to us, while the Psalms speak for us.”<sup>13</sup>

Our Lord expressed His grief at being separated from His Father on the cross by repeating the words of [Psalm 22:1](#). Jonah’s “psalm” ([Jonah 2:2-9](#)), composed in the belly of the great fish, was an original work and yet his words and phrases were borrowed from the Book of Psalms.<sup>14</sup> Countless Christians, down through the ages, have found the Psalms to speak for them and have prayed the words of a Psalm, finding them the best expression of their souls’ desires.

We know from [Romans 8:26-27](#) that the Spirit of God speaks those things for us which are unutterable. Is it not possible that some of our unutterable feelings and desires may have been spoken by the psalmists under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? I find that the psalmist has often put his finger on a problem I have grappled with and penned what I have not been able to put into words. Consequently, the Psalms not only speak *to* us, but *for* us. We can therefore sometimes pray in the words of the Psalms more effectively than in our own words. As Theodore Laetsch has said, “How many Christians have voiced their prayers in hours of extreme anguish by repeating familiar passages from Scripture or from their hymnbook!”<sup>15</sup>

It is here that I feel a personal sense of inadequacy for I have come out of a tradition which

has little appreciation for what is often called “liturgy.” I have known nothing of prayer books or creeds. Frankly, I always felt that these were of little, if any, value. But it seems imperative that I acknowledge the Psalms to be the “Prayer Book of the people of God,”<sup>16</sup> at least for Israel, and probably for New Testament saint as well. The Psalms are provided for the congregation of God’s people to sing or to say, to the praise and glory of God.

**(3) The Psalms speak for us “out of the depths.”** I am particularly indebted to Bernhard Anderson for this insight. He has entitled his excellent book on the Psalms, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*. It is one thing to be able to praise God when we have, in our modern idiom, “had a nice day.” It is quite another to praise God when the bottom appears to have fallen out of life. If there is any time when men have turned to the Book of Psalms it is in their hour of deep despair and adversity.

No wonder the church fathers of the early centuries turned to the Psalms. And the Reformers did likewise. In the preface to his book, Bernhard Anderson reminds his readers that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazi regime, was a man deeply influenced by the Psalms.<sup>17</sup> His last publication before his death was *The Prayer Book of the Bible: An Introduction to the Psalms* (1940). On May 15th, 1943, he wrote these words: “I am reading the Psalms daily, as I have done for years. I know them and love them more than any other book in the Bible.”<sup>18</sup>

A friend who was with him in his last days said: “[Bonhoeffer] always seemed to me to diffuse an atmosphere of happiness, of joy in every smallest event in life, and of deep gratitude for the mere fact that he was alive.... He was one of the very few men that I have ever met to whom his God was real and close to him.”<sup>19</sup>

It was another Russian prison camp in the same war which produced yet another student of the Psalms. Claus Westermann, a scholar whose work has contributed greatly to the study of the Psalms, was imprisoned with a copy of Luther’s translation of the Psalms. During his confinement he turned his attention to the Psalms and his writings<sup>20</sup> have benefited many students of these precious Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

Since the Psalms speak for us “out of the depths” (this expression comes from the opening words of [Psalm 130](#)), we may find comfort, consolation, and the words to praise God in our darkest hours. This, incidentally, explains much of the reason why the Psalms are so neglected in preaching and worship in most American congregations. The truth is that we have had it too easy. We, like the Laodicean church of the Book of Revelation, have found Christianity comfortable and we have become complacent. It is when we are suffering and



God seems strangely absent that our attention turns to this precious book. I pray that it will not take tragedy and trouble to motivate our study.

I might also add that it is noteworthy that virtually every Psalm which is attributed to David is a Psalm of lament. Most, if not all, of the Psalms of David were written in the days when he was fleeing from Saul, not when he was sitting on the throne of the nation. If anyone qualifies to praise God from “out of the depths” it was Jonah, for his psalm was composed from within the belly of that great fish which God had appointed to save him (cf. [Jonah 2:1-9](#)).

**(4) The Psalms are not only a “Prayer Book” but a pattern for worship.** Much of the value of the Psalms is that they speak to and for us. I believe this helps explain why Paul instructed the churches of the New Testament times regarding the sharing of psalms ([1 Cor. 14:26](#); [Eph. 5:19](#); [Col. 3:16](#)). While I believe that much of the “psalming” which took place in the New Testament church involved reading from the Book of Psalms, I am inclined to think that when Paul spoke of a “psalm” he was also speaking of a particular form or pattern for participation, rather than referring only to the 150 psalms contained in the Book of Psalms.

If I understand the Psalms correctly they provide the saints with a pattern for participation in worship, as well as with a prayer book (the Old Testament psalms, which are read or repeated). In fact, the psalms of the Bible are not even confined to the Book of Psalms. The worship of individuals and of congregations often employed psalms. For example, the Israelites sang a song (a psalm) of praise to God after passing through the Red Sea at the Exodus ([Ex. 15:1-18](#)). In [Deuteronomy 32](#) Moses composed a psalm contrasting God’s faithfulness with Israel’s unfaithfulness. Deborah composed a song of praise after God rescued His people ([Jud. 5:1-31](#)). Hannah sang a psalm of praise to God for the gift of her son, Samuel ([1 Sam. 2:1-10](#)).

Not all the psalms of the Old Testament were psalms of praise and thanksgiving. Many were psalms of lament. There are psalms of lament in the Book of Job (e.g., 3:3-12, 13-19, 20-26; 7:1-10; 10:1-22). The books of Jeremiah (e.g., 15:15-18; 17:14-18) and Lamentations (e.g., chaps. 3; 5) contain numerous laments.<sup>22</sup>

This leads me to the conclusion that the Psalms provide us not only with a passage to ponder and to pray, but also with a pattern for our prayer and worship. Martin Luther found the Psalms to be a school of prayer: “The Christian can learn to pray in the psalter, for here he can hear how the saints talk with God. The number of moods which are expressed here, joy and suffering, hope and care, make it possible for every Christian to find himself in it, and to pray with the psalms.”<sup>23</sup> If the Psalms are a pattern for our worship, our prayer, and our

praise, then it is my hope that our study of the Psalms will make of us better worshippers, more skillful and faithful than we have ever been before in prayer and in praise.

## Conclusion

The psalmist pictures God as enthroned upon the praises of His people:

O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer;  
And by night, but I have no rest.  
Yet Thou art holy,  
O Thou who art enthroned upon the praises of Israel ([Ps. 22:2-3](#)).

My friend, if God were enthroned upon your praises, how glorious would that throne be? If God were to be seen enthroned upon the praises of our church, how glorious would He appear to men?

I am coming to the conclusion that not only is worship more important than evangelism, fellowship, edification, discipleship or church planting, but it is really the means to these things. Our fellowship is best focused on the Lord's Table (cf. [Acts 2:42](#)), rather than around the coffee table or the television set. Evangelism is the outworking and the effect of worship. Observing the Lord's Table is said to be a proclamation of our Lord's death ([1 Cor. 11:26](#)). When the Philippian jailer fell before Paul and Silas and asked the question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved" ([Acts 16:30](#)), it was because these saints had responded to their persecution with praise and worship: "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" ([Acts 16:25](#)).

The most convincing witness men will ever observe is the worship of the saints. In the Old Testament the patriarchs proclaimed their faith to the heathen by building an altar and "calling on the name of the Lord" (e.g., [Gen. 12:8](#); [13:4](#); [21:33](#)), an expression which combines the worship of the saint with his witness.

It is my hope that you will acknowledge that worship is a dimension in your life which is of the highest priority and much in need of improvement. I pray that you will see that the Book of Psalms can do much to improve your worship as you study it and make it a part of your devotional life.

I sincerely desire that this message will help you to have a sense of history as you hold the Bible (and especially the Book of Psalms) in your hands. The Psalms which you have before you greatly influenced the thinking of the apostles and the worship of the early church. The



Psalms have been found worthy of the study and devotion of the greatest men of the centuries, and have brought comfort to those who have suffered for their faith. Any book so revered and read for centuries is worthy of your study.

Because of this, I challenge you to make a serious commitment as we begin our study of the Psalms. I do not urge you to make it casually or quickly. I encourage you to ponder it, for it is a vow, and vows should not be taken lightly (cf. [Ps. 56:12](#); [Prov. 20:25](#)). But after due deliberation, if worship is as important as the Bible says it is then I would urge you to make a commitment before God to faithfully study the Psalms for your own personal growth as a child of God. If I have urged you to be wise through our previous study of the Book of Proverbs, I now exhort you to be like David, a man (or woman) after the heart of God. Such a course is not easy but, as our study of [Psalm 1](#) and [Psalm 119](#) will indicate, it is clear.

If you have never become a child of God through faith in Christ, I urge you to acknowledge your sin, to trust fully and finally in the work of Christ on the cross of Calvary and to thus be born again. You cannot worship God except through the Lord Jesus Christ:

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father. You worship that which you do not know; we worship that which we know; for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He" ([John 4:21-26](#)).

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" ([John 14:6](#)).

God only accepts worship through the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. If you would worship God, it must be through Christ. Those who will not fall before our Lord in faith and adoration now must ultimately do so as His conquered enemies:

Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father ([Phil. 2:9-11](#)).

1 The relationship between Psalms and Proverbs can perhaps best be grasped in terms of the difference between David and Solomon. Solomon was, as we know, given more wisdom than any man who had ever lived (1 Kings 3:12). If Solomon was known for his wisdom, some of which is recorded in the Book of Proverbs, David was known for his heart for God (1 Sam. 13:14), which is reflected in the Psalms. It was, in fact, the whole-heartedness of David in seeking and serving God which distinguished him above his son Solomon (1 Kings 11:4).

2 A portion of the “Hymn to the Moon-God,” translated by Ferris J. Stephens, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 385f., as quoted by Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), p. 27.

3 “Hymn to the Aton,” translated by John A. Wilson, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, pp. 369-73, as quoted by Bernhard Anderson, p. 29.

4 “It is of special interest to Christians that the New Testament quotes more liberally from the Psalter than from any other Old Testament book. Kirkpatrick claims there are 93 such quotations; Delitzsch, 70. The difference in number is obviously due to the fact that it is difficult to determine whether certain statements or phrases merit the designation of a quotation.” H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969 [reprint]), pp. 4-5.

5 Ibid., p. 5.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p. 3.

9 Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, p. vii.

10 As quoted by John H. Hayes, *Understanding the Psalms* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976), p. 5.

11 Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (New York: Alba House, 1970), p. 4.

12 Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p. 50.

13 Ibid., p. x.

14 “The prayer is saturated with quotations from, or reminiscences of, psalms written by David or in his age and therefore well known to pious Israelites. Compare (in A.V.) [Jonah 2:2](#) with [Ps. 18:4-6](#); [30:3](#); [120:1](#)—v. 3 with [Ps. 42:7](#)—v. 4 with [Ps. 31:22](#); [5:7](#)—v. 5 with [Ps. 18:7](#); [69:1f.](#)—v. 6 with [Ps. 18:16](#); [30:3](#); [103:4](#)—v. 7 with [Ps. 142:3](#); [43:4](#); [18:6](#); [5:7](#); [88:2](#)—v. 8 with [Ps. 31:16](#)—v. 9 with [Ps. 42:4](#); [50:14,23](#); [116:17](#).” Theodore Laetsch, *The Minor Prophets* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 232.

15 Ibid.

16 Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, p. vii.

17 Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p. x, 2, 75-76.

18 Ibid., p. 75.

19 Ibid., p. 76.

20 Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (London: Epworth, 1965), *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), *The Psalms: Structure Content and Message* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980).

21 Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, p. 2.

22 For a fuller listing of these “laments” cf. Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, pp. 6-8.

23 As quoted by Ronald Barclay Allen, *Praise! A Matter of Life and Breath* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), p. 24.

Related Topics: [Introductions](#), [Arguments](#), [Outlines](#), [Worship \(Personal\)](#)





# Bible College Programs

Liberty University Online Bible College. Request Enrollment Info!

